

Guest Editorial . . .

Evangelical Theology and Paul Tillich

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Why is Paul Tillich significant for evangelical theology? Simply because he is the most controversial theologian in America today! Discussion of his thought appears in all the contemporary theological journals. But his fame is not limited purely to religious circles. Articles by him and about him are appearing in some of America's most widely circulated popular magazines.¹ His name appears in the index of nearly every current book written in the field of the humanities. The conclusion is inescapable: Tillich is America's most influential theological spokesman.

That a man who claims to be a Protestant theologian is thus read, appreciated, and (inevitably) criticized not only by professional theologians but also by laymen and by secular scholarship in general, is an event of no small significance for twentieth-century theology. To stay alive theologically in this age evangelical thought must come to grips with the thought of Paul Tillich; for, as *Time* magazine recently reminded us,² he is offering a realistic "Theology for Protestants" as the only way of salvation in the cultural and religious crisis of our twentieth century--and large, influential segments of American Protestantism are accepting that offer.

Tillich's significance for American theology, moreover, has just begun to be felt. He has written eleven books currently circulating in English,³ with one more scheduled to appear in May of 1959. Eight of these have appeared since 1951, the most important of which are his two volumes of *Systematic Theology*. The thirty-page lifetime bibliography of Tillich (through January, 1959) compiled in *Religion and Culture*:

¹See "The Lost Dimension in Religion" by Tillich in *The Saturday Evening Post*, June 14, 1958, and "A Theology for Protestants," the feature article in *Time*, March 16, 1959.

²*Ibid.*

³See list at end of this editorial.

*Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*⁴ is not only a testimonial to the profundity and fertility of his thought, but it also demonstrates the earnestness with which he has sought to communicate with contemporary minds at every stage of his life. Such a dynamic author and thinker certainly merits the kind of hearing and inter-action which this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* affords. Evangelical scholars and pastors should thoroughly acquaint themselves with Tillich's theology. The impact of his thought through his students and his writings will be formative for theological discussion for years to come.

Having said this, we must concede realistically that we have set before ourselves no minor task. The massive, archetectonic structure of Tillich's thought inspires both awe and despair. On their first attempt to wade into his writings most pastors will concur with the appraisal of one rector that "in one sense he is like the peace of God, for he passes all understanding."⁵ Even a scholar initiated into the secret gobble-de-gook of professional philosophers and theologians will find Tillich "rough plowing."

Why is Tillich so difficult to understand? Several reasons for this may be noted. First, Tillich is a product of one of the great tragedies of modern history. Because of his political-theological views (Religious Socialism) he was forced to leave Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power. At the invitation of Reinhold Niebuhr he came to America. He was then forty-seven years old, and the adjustment to American culture (especially the language) was, as he puts it, "rather difficult."⁶ As a lecturer in theology and philosophy at Union Theological Seminary he was for a long time something of a conundrum. The disparity between his ponderous classical German *Weltanschauung* and the relatively superficial slapstick educational tradition of his American students stood in boldest relief. Walter M. Horton has remarked that "his earliest public lectures, delivered in a formidable German accent, created an impression which might be described as 'respectful mystification.'"⁷ In Tillich's most recent writings,

⁴Edited by Walter Liebrecht (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959). The bibliography is located pp. 367-396.

⁵In "Letters to the Editor," *Time* (April 6, 1959), p. 8.

⁶*The Theology of Paul Tillich*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 17.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 35.

especially in *The Dynamics of Faith*, this particular difficulty has been significantly overcome. Even so the beginner reading his first pages in Tillich's theology will note, and indeed, must keep well in mind, the vast cultural gap between Tillich and his American audience.

The second thing which makes Tillich difficult to understand is his dreadful terminology. One must become accustomed to face without intellectual flinching such terms as "New Being," "Being-Itself," "Non-Being," "Gestalt of grace," "Theonomy," "Estrangement," and "Angst." In part this terminology is explained by Tillich's background.⁸ He was educated in the nineteenth-century classical German tradition and such terms were standard currency in the theological and philosophical vocabulary of that day.⁹ Unless one understands something of the German idealistic philosophies of Hegel, Fichte, and especially Schelling, Tillich's thought will remain a constant enigma.

But this natural tendency to couch his thought in the categories of the educational milieu in which he was reared is supplemented by a basic philosophical conviction with which Tillich works. According to his "method of correlation," as he calls it, the solution to the problems of contemporary man must be couched in a terminology appropriate to the situation which gave rise to those problems. It is Tillich's conviction that contemporary Existentialism of the Kierkegaard and

⁸It is impossible to grasp fully the implications of Tillich's theology without knowing the historical context of his life. Fortunately, considerable autobiographical and biographical material is available to English readers. See *The Interpretation of History*, pp. 3-73 (which in this reviewer's opinion is the most fruitful introduction to Tillich's thought in print); *The Protestant Era*, pp. ix-xxix; and *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, pp. 3-21. For an excellent biographical analysis see R. Allan Killen, *The Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich* (Netherlands: J. H. Kok, N. V. Kampen, 1956), pp. 3-53.

⁹Tillich says ". . . I cannot accept criticism as valuable which merely insinuates that I have surrendered the substance of the Christian message because I have used terminology which consciously deviates from the biblical or ecclesiastical language. Without such deviation, I would not have deemed it worthwhile to develop a theological system for our period." *Systematic Theology*, II, p. viii.

Heidegger variety offers such a terminology. It is "the good luck of Christian theology," so he avers,¹⁰ that a ready-made set of tools for thought is available for contemporary Protestant theology.

But the terminology of Tillich is not determined merely by nineteenth-century German philosophy bent so as to fit the shape of modern Existentialism. He also adds a little twist of his own. He is an exceedingly abstract thinker, and his language reflects this personal characteristic. He is also an original thinker of great depth. Frequently, therefore, he finds it necessary to manufacture *de novo* his own meanings.

In any case, if one wishes to appreciate Tillich's thought, he must first make an effort to understand Tillich's strange and excessively abstract patterns of thought as well as his bizarre terminology. An unreasonable bent towards the concrete and the practical, typical of most Americans including evangelicals, breeds a superficial contempt for anything deeper than Pogo, especially if it cannot be sketched in a cartoon or comic strip. Such an attitude does not help us to understand Tillich. Neither does it prove that Tillich is not worth listening to.

If, as we have said, evangelical theology cannot afford to neglect interaction with Tillich's thought, what attitude can we and should we take in appraising it? Certainly one cannot but feel deeply grateful for Tillich's attempt to bring to the twentieth-century scene an "apologetic theology," a theology which attempts to answer the questions of modern man "in the power of the eternal message [the Christian *kerygma*] and with the means provided by the situation whose questions it answers."¹¹ One may not agree that an analysis of human existence must necessarily, even apart from divine revelation, place before us the correct questions (as Tillich believes). His emphasis on the *need* for a common medium of communication between theology and the secular world, and his insistence that there *is* a common ground of thought possible between them, are, none the less, a healthy antidote against the Barthian position that there is an unbridgeable gulf which can only allow the message of Christ to be "thrown at those in the situation [of human existence]--thrown like a stone."¹²

¹⁰*Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 54f.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 7.

The attempt to build a religiously grounded philosophy of life is likewise welcome. To make the gospel relevant for this age is the crying need of evangelical theology today. The gospel must be made relevant in terms of the "scientific and artistic, the economic, political, and ethical forms" of mid-twentieth century man.¹³ Christian truth must be redigested in relation to the needs of every new generation and then preached meaningfully on that new level of need. Our only fear is that Dr. Tillich has frequently lost the substance of Christian truth in the attempt to squeeze it into the mold of contemporary philosophy.

In spite of certain welcome emphases and insights which the evangelical will find in Tillich's contemporary analysis of man and his relation to God, there are, unfortunately, many important areas in which he has surrendered the specifically *Christian* substance of theology. Theology may avail itself of philosophical analyses and categories, but for any truly Christian theology the substance of such categories cannot be built up in defiance of the personalistic theism set forth in the biblical revelation. No doubt, the philosophical implications of his basic ideas have often been misunderstood or even distorted into something far worse than they really are. The personal, immanent, transcendent God of the Bible, however, cannot be surrendered in exchange for the Hegelian-like depersonalized, merely immanent God of Tillich.¹⁴

Likewise we must call a halt to his reconstruction of Christology, which tends to revive ancient Adoptionism. According to biblical revelation the difference between Jesus and other men is not simply one of degree; and for all his sweating and stewing, Tillich does not really get beyond this. We must also sternly reject any theology which interprets the distinctive aspects of Jesus' life and teaching in mythological terms. We certainly would not criticize Tillich's attempt to

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

¹⁴See his analytic attempt to translate biblical religion into philosophical and transpersonal terms in *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Nels Ferré is the most vociferous critic of Tillich's depersonalization of God. See his article, "Three Critical Issues in Tillich's Philosophical Theology," *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, X, No. 3 (Sept., 1957), 225-238.

restate the doctrine of the Incarnation in terms meaningful for our day; nor would we criticize him were he to weigh the formal conceptions of Chalcedon in the scales of the biblical revelation. But the Christ whom he presents in volume two of his *Systematic Theology* merely preserves ideas set forth *ad nauseum* over the last century and a half of Protestant liberalism--namely that the essential divinity of all human nature ("God-Manhood" as Tillich calls it) was realized to perfection in the man of Nazareth. To say this is to oversimplify Tillich's position; but, nonetheless, it gets at the crux of the matter. However unsatisfactory may be the traditional explanations of the Incarnation with respect to the hypostatic union of the human and divine in Jesus Christ, the Chalcedonian Creed still sets forth Christian substance, whereas Tillich's "dynamic-relational" interpretation of the person of Christ has lost the very essence of biblical truth. Tillich's concept of myth and symbol regarding the New Testament picture of Jesus as the Christ has its philosophical roots in the evolutionary presupposition of the natural and gradual growth of religious consciousness among men. It has not taken seriously the radical nature of the Judaic-Christian revelation of the unique God-manhood of Jesus Christ.

These are, to be sure, quite general criticisms. The articles contained in this issue of the *Seminarian* will grapple in detail with the problems of Tillich's theology. Reinhold Niebuhr has rightly stated that "Tillich's greatness lies in his exploration of the boundary between metaphysics and theology," and that "the difficult task of 'walking the tight-rope' is not negotiated without the peril of losing one's balance and falling over on one side or the other."¹⁵ While evangelical theologians will certainly find Tillich's attempt to walk that "tight-rope" full of helpful apologetic insights, they cannot escape the conviction that he has fallen off balance far to the side of philosophy, and that this fall has rendered him insensitive to the crucial uniqueness of the Christian revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

¹⁵ *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, pp. 226-227.

¹⁶ For a further analysis of Tillich's Christology see James O. Yerkes, "Tillich's Concept of Jesus and the New Being" (Wheaton: Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1959).

Appendage to footnote number 3.

List of Tillich's books:

1. *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952).
2. *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).
3. *The New Being* (New York: Scribner's, 1955).
4. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).
5. *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper's, 1957; reprinted in Harper Torchbook series, TB 42, 1958).
6. *Systematic Theology*, II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
7. The volume soon to appear, *Theology and Culture*, edited by Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press), is a compilation of previously printed essays.
8. *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Henry Holt, 1932; reprinted by Meridian Books, LA 6, 1956).
9. *The Interpretation of History*, tran. N. A. Rasetzki and E. L. Talmey (New York: Scribner's, 1936).
10. *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).
11. *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).